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The U.S. Can Do More to Prevent an Israel-Iran War

Genuine pressure on Israel and Hamas to enact a Gaza cease-fire could dial down tensions across the region.

By **Comfort Ero**, the president and CEO of the International Crisis Group.

آزادی خواه و مخالف انحراف
شهید شریعت

Iranians burn an Israeli flag during the funeral ceremony of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran, on Aug. 1. MAJID SAEEDI/GETTY IMAGES

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The Middle East faces a moment of peril. Since Hamas attacked Israel on Oct. 7, 2023, and Israel responded with a brutal campaign in Gaza, the region has been on edge. The longer the Gaza war rages, the more likely it is to set off a regional war. Following the assassination in Tehran of Ismail Haniyeh, Hamas's political leader, a potentially calamitous cycle of escalation looms as Iran and its allies, including Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, and militias operating under the banner of the Islamic Resistance in Iraq and Syria, prepare to retaliate.

While the outlook is dire, recent history suggests a dangerous escalation cycle between the longtime adversaries can be contained. Nineteen dramatic days in April showed how it can be done. After an Israeli strike on an Iranian consular facility in Damascus killed several senior commanders from Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Tehran launched an unprecedented and massive direct strike against Israel.

A degree of forewarning; the fact that Iran's network of nonstate allies largely held their fire; and aerial defenses from Israel, together with the United States and other Western and some Arab countries, limited the damage, and Israel responded with a limited strike inside Iran.

But history may not repeat itself.

Worryingly, this time around, the public rhetoric from Iranian officials and what they are reportedly saying to diplomats suggests that a bigger and potentially more damaging retaliation is in the works, including coordinated attacks from Iranian allies. Iran's leadership might fear an Israeli retaliation, but it appears to fear the impression of passivity even more.

It was deeply embarrassed by the Haniyeh assassination shortly after Iran's new president was inaugurated in the heart of the capital. Iran's national security establishment worries that anything less than a major retaliation could send the signal that it's prepared to acquiesce to Israel killing Iranian officials and allied leaders. For its part, Israel has made clear that, should Iran attack, it will also up the pain in its counterstrike and might even take preemptive action.

In seeking to limit Iran's retaliation for the Haniyeh assassination and Hezbollah's response to the killing of one of its top commanders in Beirut the day before, the United States and its allies have been pushing a three-pronged crisis management strategy: seeking an immediate cease-fire in Gaza; sending additional defensive capabilities to Israel; and working through back channels to urge Iran to limit its fire.

Yet despite reported pressure from senior Israeli security officials and frustration in Washington, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu continues to reject the first plank—a Gaza truce—which would be critical to easing wider tensions in the region. As for the third plank, Iran seems intent on pushing forward with a large-scale offensive action.

If U.S. efforts to cap an escalatory cycle fail, the worst-case scenario could include an Iranian-led attack that causes significant casualties and damage in Israel, which could then prompt Israel to make good on its threats of an all-out assault on Lebanon that would leave much of the country in ruins, expand the battlefield in Yemen by striking the Houthis, and climb further up the escalatory ladder by attacking Iran's command structure or key nodes in its nuclear program.

Such a move might lead Tehran to conclude that it has little left to lose. Attacks by Iranian proxies on U.S. forces in Iraq and Syria, which have resumed after a relative lull, could expand and draw U.S. forces back into larger-scale active combat. At some point, the local hostilities, discreet targeted attacks, and exchanges of fire beyond Gaza that have pockmarked the Middle East since Oct. 7 would merge into something bigger and far more consequential: a full-scale regional war with potentially devastating effects on global trade and energy supplies, with high rates of civilian casualties.

This scenario is still avoidable. Even if the U.S. effort to contain hostilities is currently struggling, that effort is aided by the reality that neither Washington (eager to avoid a Middle East entanglement at the height of an election season) nor Tehran (which does not want to shoulder the costs of all-out war for less than what it sees as existential stakes) is looking for a protracted fight. Nor does Hezbollah (which stands to lose some of its substantial arsenal in a major confrontation) appear to want a full-scale war with Israel.

It is past time to do so. Washington should throw its full weight behind a cease-fire and hostage deal in Gaza on the terms that it previously proposed and to which Israel previously agreed. Of course this can only work if Hamas continues to be on board after Haniyeh's killing, and the latter's replacement by Yahya Sinwar (the mastermind behind the Oct. 7 attack), but the United States should actually test the proposition by genuinely pressing Israel.

To do so, Washington should make clear that it will withhold the provision of ammunition and weapons for non-defensive purposes to Israel if Netanyahu's obstructionism remains an impediment to a deal. At the same time, it should look to those with channels to Hamas to convey that this may be their last chance for a near-term deal. It should also seek the United Nations Security Council's unanimous support for a resolution that would create a binding commitment on all actors to support and comply with the cease-fire, going a step further than the council's June cease-fire resolution on which Russia abstained.

If progress is made toward a cease-fire in Gaza, Washington could quietly encourage a parallel effort to de-escalate the hostilities that Iran's Axis of Resistance partners have fomented around the region since Oct. 7, which could include an agreement by Hezbollah to pull its forces back in line with U.N. Security Council Resolution 1701, adopted to end the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war.

Some of these partners have already intimated that they would stand down upon the reaching of a Gaza truce. The goal would be to add greater certainty to that commitment. As in April, an understanding might be reached through back-channel talks facilitated by Oman or through trusted intermediaries such as Qatar or Switzerland.

The biggest obstacle to moving in this direction may be U.S. domestic politics. Pushing Israel this hard would entail political costs for the Biden administration (including Vice President Kamala Harris, the Democratic Party's presumptive presidential nominee) just days prior to the Democratic National Convention and in the run-up to the November presidential election.

But a spiraling regional war could be even more costly for a president who ran for office promising to end endless wars—a commitment that Republican leaders have made as well—and whose foreign-policy legacy may well be judged through the lens of how he dealt with this moment of danger to the Middle East and the world.

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